

"I had to stop just being nice"

A Preterm worker explains the strike

Many of the workers at Preterm, particularly the counselors, came there because of the emphasis in counseling and excellent patient care. But pressure from the owners was threatening to turn the clinic into a respectable and highly profitable abortion mill. Counselors who resisted this trend were harassed and fired.

Caught in the middle, the workers decided that the only way they could gain job security and any control over conditions at Preterm was by joining a union. After Preterm management refused to accept unionization, the workers went on strike.

The CommUnity News spoke with Lilly Piñero, one of the strikers, who was born in Puerto Rico and was hired at Preterm to counsel Spanish-speaking women.

"At first, I felt I was really lucky. I wanted to work in women's health care and I wanted to work with Latin women."

Although Preterm advertised that it offered services to the Spanish community, there were no Spanish-speaking doctors or nurses and no Spanish-speaking counselors until Lilly was hired. Lilly soon found that she was expected to answer phones, do all the translating and, she felt, play nurse and doctor, too.

"I overheard staff people and administration say things like 'Spanish-speaking women are hard to handle. It's a cultural thing. They scream and move around a lot.' Obviously," Lilly said, "Preterm knows nothing about Latin culture."



RACISM AT PRETERM

"On two different occasions I was asked to push sterilization on Spanish-speaking women. Once this had been suggested by an administrator, who hadn't even seen the individual woman's chart. I guess it was assumed Spanish-speaking women just had too many children. I was outraged."

After a while, Lilly's supervisors told her she was spending too much time with the patients.

"I thought counseling was real important. Most Spanish-speaking women had been told little about birth control. If they had been given the pill in most city clinics, the side effects had not been explained to them. Most of them spoke no English and felt guilty and confused."

"Listen, abortion is supposed to mean a woman's right to choose, to have control of her own body. But their lack of money meant that they couldn't really choose. Most of the women couldn't afford to have



another baby, but Preterm's emphasis definitely was not on preventative birth control. Their basic interest is in making money, and in the fastest abortion procedure possible."

WORKERS VOTE TO UNIONIZE

Lilly explained that in November, 1974 Preterm's gynecological section (for check-ups and care not related to abortion and birth control) was cut in half because it wasn't making enough money. Seven workers were laid off.

One month later, the workers voted to join District 1199 of the Hospital and Health Care Worker's Union. "We knew this wouldn't solve all our problems but we felt a union contract would be a first step toward job security and control over working conditions at Preterm. It's the first step in the beginning of a process."

Throughout the negotiations, the management dragged their feet and after 10 months they still refused to accept a union contract. It was then that 50 of the 68 workers in the Preterm bargaining unit went on strike. "Most of those who refused to join the strike were recently-hired workers who had been chosen for their anti-union attitudes."

GOOD WORKING CONDITIONS MEAN GOOD PATIENT CARE

Lilly explained her reasons for striking: "First, I felt we had to get better working conditions for ourselves. But I also felt a lot of guilt. Shouldn't I feel personally responsible for the patients, especially the Spanish-speaking ones, when I was the only person they could talk to? Before the Union, whenever I complained or felt angry, the administration always turned it around-like I should be grateful for the job, that the clinic was my responsibility and that I just wasn't doing enough."

"Then I understood that the one thing - good patient care - was a consequence of the other - good working conditions."

SCABS GIVE POOR CARE

The Preterm management has tried to keep the business open during the strike by hiring scabs (strikebreakers) and bringing them to work in buses at 6 a.m. Although the numbers of patients have gone down drastically, there are still some who cross the picket line. The kind of treatment these patients are getting at the hands of the scabs gives a good indication of what Preterm might have become if the workers had not resisted. Lilly told us about a patient who went to Preterm after the strike began.

"The patient, who was 35 years old, spoke no English, and one of the two friends who went with her spoke only a little English. The counselor who saw her, Diane, didn't speak Spanish. She gave her birth control pills without taking an adequate medical history, and told her nothing about any other kind of birth control."

After the women left the clinic, they spent 45 minutes talking with Lilly, who was outside on the picket line, while she explained all about birth control.

WOMEN DISCOVER THEIR STRENGTH

Lilly said, "You know, women are trained to be nice no matter what, but at Preterm I was going crazy. I was always told to shorten my counseling sessions. I felt like I didn't - we didn't - have any power, and I was getting angry."

"Since the strike, I've gotten to know parts in myself and in other women that I always knew were there - getting angry and fighting back together. I had to stop just being 'nice.' I'm learning a lot from the other women strikers."

"When I was 14 in Puerto Rico, I crossed a picket line. I thought, 'What did it have to do with me?' Now I think of all these issues - women, workers, decent health care - as a continuing process, and I am more aware of the issues back in Puerto Rico. VENCEREMOS."

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